United Nations S/PV.4773

Security Council

Fifty-eighth year

Provisional

4773rd meeting

Friday, 13 June 2003, 10.30 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Lavrov	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Lucas
	Bulgaria	Mr. Raytchev
	Cameroon	Mr. Tidjani
	Chile	Mr. Acuña
	China	Mr. Wang Yingfan
	France	Mr. Duclos
	Germany	Mr. Pleuger
	Guinea	Mr. Cheick Ahmed Tidiane Camara
	Mexico	Mr. Pujalte
	Pakistan	Mr. Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry
	Spain	Mr. Arias
	Syrian Arab Republic	Mr. Wehbe
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Jeremy Greenstock
	United States of America	Mr. Cunningham

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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03-39547 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.40 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Russian*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Prendergast: The period since the last briefing on the situation in the Middle East, on 19 May, has been marked by signs of hope — and by some grave reverses, too. President Bush's initiative to hold the Aqaba summit gave an especially important impetus to the renewal of the peace process. The statements of Prime Minister Abbas and Prime Minister Sharon at the summit opened the way to begin implementation of the road map, which leads to the two-State solution envisaged in Security Council resolution 1397 (2002).

But regrettably, as we have witnessed all too often in recent years, the Aqaba summit was followed by a sharp rise in violence, reigniting the familiar spiral of violence, counter-violence and revenge. Today, we are at a point where either the promise of peace or a resumption of violence will define the course of the political process in the weeks and months ahead. Faced with that choice, it is essential that the parties choose the road to peace. Violence leads only down into the abyss.

I believe that all of us sense that the combination in quick succession of endorsement of the road map by the parties and the successful outcome of the Aqaba summit created the conditions for a genuine transformation of the political dynamics away from violence and towards peace. But those conditions are still tenuous, and the achievement of Aqaba is fragile. Not unexpectedly, Prime Ministers Abbas and Sharon have each met resistance at home to the commitments they made at Aqaba. Those on the extremes will continue to do everything they can to stifle the nascent peace process.

Under these circumstances, the international community has a responsibility to do everything possible to help the parties remain on the path they set for themselves at Aqaba. They will need active support throughout the process of implementing the road map, leading to a permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of the search for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace on all tracks of the Middle East peace process.

The international community must play its part by supporting the parties. But there is no substitute for determination and commitment by the parties themselves to end this conflict. Each of the two sides will have to make difficult concessions if peace is to become a reality.

I now turn to events on the ground since the last briefing. Only four days after the Aqaba summit, on 8 June, four Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) soldiers were killed when three Palestinian groups — Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade — carried out a joint attack on IDF soldiers near the Erez crossing. Another solider was killed in a separate incident. Such attacks can be seen only as direct challenges to Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas, who has been working to achieve a cessation of all forms of violence by Palestinian groups.

Two days later, amidst efforts by the Palestinian Authority to halt violence and terrorism, Israel fired rockets from helicopter gunships in an attempt to assassinate Abdul Aziz Rantisi, a Hamas leader. Mr. Rantisi was injured in the attack; three persons were killed, including a mother and her three-year-old child; and approximately 27 persons were injured.

On 11 June, a suicide bomber struck a crowded bus in downtown Jerusalem, killing at least 17 people and wounding dozens. A Hamas leader and his family, including his wife and two children, as well as three other persons, died in an apparent extrajudicial killing by Israeli forces on 12 June. And on 10, 11 and 12

June, Israel deployed helicopter gunships to launch attacks on targets in the Gaza Strip, leaving a total of 23 persons dead.

In response to those attacks, Hamas has threatened that every Israeli has become a target and has urged foreigners to leave Israel immediately.

Undoubtedly, for the parties, staying on the path of the road map in the face of continuing violence is very difficult. Since the last briefing to the Security Council, 63 Palestinians and 26 Israelis have lost their lives. That raises the total death toll since September 2000 to 2,714 Palestinians and 778 Israelis. But let us be clear: stay the course they must. The alternative is no alternative.

As regards the Palestinians, we should all work to assist Prime Minister Abbas and Minister of State for Internal Security Dahlan. Under the first phase of the road map, the Palestinian Authority is required to undertake visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis.

The Secretary-General has stated time and time again that terrorist attacks are morally reprehensible and have as their purpose the undermining of the peace process. He has called on the Palestinian Authority to do everything in its power to stop terrorist attacks from territory under its control. He has also called on the Palestinian Authority to meet its obligations under international law to protect Israeli civilians.

In endorsing the road map, the Palestinian Authority has committed itself to rebuild and refocus the Palestinian security forces to provide security effectively for Palestinians and to prevent terrorist attacks on Israelis. In addition, the Palestinian Authority is to regroup all security forces under the authority of the Minister of the Interior, Prime Minister Abbas — a task which has not yet begun.

As for the Israeli side, the Government of Israel should immediately halt actions such as extrajudicial killings. Israel should also stop using excessive and disproportionate force in civilian areas, which has caused the death and injury of so many Palestinian civilians. And the Government should discontinue measures of collective punishment, including house demolitions and curfews. The Secretary-General has repeatedly called on the Government of Israel to desist from such acts. He has also called on Israel, consistent with international humanitarian law, to take steps to ensure the protection of Palestinian civilians.

The road map calls on Israel to take no actions undermining trust in its first phase. Tuesday's attack on Mr. Rantisi — which undercut the efforts of the Palestinian Authority to negotiate a ceasefire as a first step to disarming violent armed groups — is counter to the spirit of the road map. Unfortunately, such attacks are likely only to harden sentiments among the Palestinian people and to strengthen the extremists. Israel has a right to self-defence in the face of repeated terrorist attacks. However, we continue to believe firmly that the best way to ensure the long-term security of Israel is through the pursuit of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, beginning with implementation of the road map.

During the period since the last briefing, there was continuing significant destruction of Palestinian property by the IDF. Agricultural lands totalling some 477 acres of citrus trees and olive groves were bulldozed. In the Gaza Strip alone, approximately 275 acres were destroyed. In addition, some 74 homes in the occupied Palestinian territory were destroyed, rendering more than 700 persons homeless.

The humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory has not improved, despite the tentative steps towards renewal of the political process. As we have stated in previous briefings, the main cause of the humanitarian crisis is the closure regime imposed by the Government of Israel. Since the last briefing, the humanitarian situation has worsened as a result of a tightening of the closure.

A more stringent movement control regime has been introduced by the IDF at the main entry and transit points to and within the occupied Palestinian territory. The circulation of Palestinians within the West Bank has been reduced since the suicide bomb attack in Afula on 19 May, while the movement of West Bank residents with permits to Jerusalem has been completely halted since 2 June. On average, 204,000 Palestinians in 21 localities were placed under curfews of varying duration during the first two weeks of June. The populations of Hebron and Tulkarem were hardest hit by uninterrupted curfews of up to seven consecutive days.

The Gaza Strip was placed under tight closure following the 8 June attack by Palestinian groups on the Erez crossing. Movement within the Gaza Strip,

particularly across the Abu Houli checkpoint in central Gaza, is restricted to several hours each day. Vehicular traffic into and out of Beit Hanoun, outside Gaza City, is limited to United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross cars. No exception is made for Palestinian ambulance operators, who are now instructed to employ the so-called back-to-back method for medical evacuations, which requires that patients be moved from an ambulance on one side of the checkpoint to an ambulance on the other side. This is a method that is more usually employed for the movement of commercial goods.

The movement of goods to the Gaza Strip via the Karni crossing — which is the only crossing for humanitarian goods — has been limited. Only 200-250 trucks with commercial and humanitarian items are entering daily, as compared with up to 700 in April and May. Since 11 June, the Karni crossing has again been fully closed. Israeli authorities have provided assurances that humanitarian goods can be brought into the Gaza Strip via an alternative crossing point, but, based on past experience, it is doubtful if the alternative will allow for sufficient volume of vehicles to meet humanitarian needs.

If the Palestinian Authority is to build effective institutions and gain the support of the Palestinian people for the peace process, it is essential that the closure regime be eased. It is incumbent upon Israel to pursue its security and self-defence in a manner that minimizes the suffering of Palestinian civilians.

In the last briefing to the Council, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, Terje Roed-Larsen, described a new, draconian closure regime for the Gaza Strip that seriously affected the work of United Nations and other international agencies. For a brief period, between 2 and 10 June, the situation improved somewhat, even though the movement of international personnel and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip remained subject to a stringent Israeli security closure regime. On 10 and 11 June 2003, Gaza was closed to all but those with diplomatic passports. Moreover, the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt has been closed as well.

Since the last briefing, representatives of the United Nations system and the broader international community have met on several occasions with interlocutors from the Government of Israel on the issue of movement restrictions. On 27 May, I met with the Deputy Permanent Representative of Israel to express the United Nations concerns about the closure. On 29 May, two meetings took place in the region between the Government of Israel and the international community to discuss the access situation, with particular focus on the Gaza Strip.

The closure of the Gaza Strip to national and international staff of international organizations has a detrimental effect on our efforts to provide needed humanitarian assistance. Mr. Roed-Larsen described the effects on the work of United Nations agencies in some detail in the briefing last month. The renewal of the closure regime — after assurances from the Israeli authorities that the situation would improve — is worrying. We will persist in our efforts to resolve this issue on the local level and will continue to keep the Council informed of developments regarding this problem and the closure regime more generally.

Meanwhile, the security of staff and goods remains a serious concern. In both meetings, the international community noted recent incidents of shootings at diplomatic vehicles and refusal to facilitate movement of a European Union/United Nations convoy. IDF investigations of these incidents have yet to be concluded.

The complete closure of Gaza was partly lifted today as international staff members can again enter and exit through the Erez crossing and Palestinians can leave the Gaza Strip through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt.

We have recently drawn the Council's attention to the Government of Israel's construction of a separation wall and the effects of this on Palestinian populations. As the construction of the wall continues, it is worth recalling its impact on the lives of those Palestinians who find themselves trapped between the new wall and the Green Line.

Phase one of the wall's alignment diverges from the Green Line by as much as 6 kilometres in some areas, penetrating into the northern West Bank and slicing across roads and water networks. It potentially separates tens of thousands of Palestinians from their agricultural lands, their wells, their markets, their schools, their health clinics and their hospitals. By the end of July, 12,000 Palestinians in 15 villages could

find themselves wedged between the wall and the Green Line. A further 138,000 Palestinians in 16 localities could be surrounded on three sides by the wall.

The construction of the wall could have obvious adverse implications for the peace process as well. Given that the wall lies well inside the West Bank and not along the Green Line, it could easily be seen as jeopardizing the territorial contiguity of a Palestinian State and therefore inhibiting the establishment of a Palestinian State on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1397 (2002) and as called for in the road map.

The placement of the wall has both short-term and long-term implications. In the short term, the isolation and separation resulting from the wall will devastate the lives and livelihoods of thousands of Palestinians, generating more frustration and anger among the Palestinian people, which could lessen support for necessary compromises. In the longer run, while we are aware of the Government of Israel's statements regarding the temporary nature of the wall, its course, particularly around Jerusalem, could prejudice final status negotiations.

While understanding the dilemma that Israel faces in deciding how to protect itself from terrorist attacks, nevertheless, in the light of developments since construction on the wall began, we believe that work on the wall should be halted. As a minimum first step to alleviate its effects, humanitarian access points should be opened in those portions of the wall that have been completed. Since work on the wall began, the road map has been presented to the parties and they have agreed to undertake its implementation. Furthermore, Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas has pledged to disarm violent Palestinian groups and to work to end terrorism. Suspending construction of the wall would contribute to the overall effort to improve security and humanitarian conditions and to restart the political process.

If I may turn for the moment to the situation along the Blue Line, we are pleased to report that the parties have continued to act with restraint, maintaining a fragile calm along the Line. It is now a little under five months since the last violent transgression of the Blue Line in late January. Since then, it appears that the parties have lived up to their stated intentions to avoid an escalation. It was in the context of this general calm that the third anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon took place last month.

Nevertheless, breaches of the Blue Line continue to take place in the form of Israeli air violations and Hizbullah anti-aircraft fire. Israeli jets have continued their pattern of often flying around the area of operation of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to enter Lebanese airspace further north. I regret to report that, despite repeated requests to the Government of Lebanon, the anti-aircraft gun placed in the immediate vicinity of UNIFIL position 8-32 since 18 February remains in place. These air violations and the consequent anti-aircraft fire that takes place carry an escalatory potential. We call again upon the parties to refrain from such actions that threaten to disrupt the otherwise calm situation and to uphold their commitment to fully respect the Blue Line.

In conclusion, let me say that the past month has witnessed the most promising openings in the political process since the autumn of 2000. The personal engagement of President Bush and the successful summit at Aqaba were developments of the highest significance which generated enormous hopes and expectations. Yet, the same period also witnessed the continuation of the sort of violence by both sides that has snuffed out every previous effort during this period to renew the peace process.

In endorsing the road map the parties have taken the first step on the path towards a permanent settlement. As I said at the beginning of my briefing, they need to stay the course, and they will need help to stay the course. With that objective uppermost in our minds, the Quartet principals will be meeting in Jordan on 22 June. Following the Aqaba summit, as well as the recent wave of violence in the region, that meeting offers a timely opportunity to discuss next steps for the work of the Quartet mechanism to strengthen the prospects for renewing the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Mr. Prendergast for his comprehensive briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.05 a.m.